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Visions and Revisions: Performance, Memory, Trauma

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Visions and Revisions: Performance, Memory, Trauma

Abstract

Visions and Revisions is a collection of essays edited by Bryoni Trezise and Caroline Wake. Read individually, they are impressive and as a collection, quite compelling, but the subtext of all, and certainly the preoccupation of several, is human beings' ongoing cruelty to others. In seeking to explore the various ways in which we might enact, embody, perform, commemorate, intervene or take responsibility for terrible histories and current cruelties the effects and affects of which extend into our everyday, this collection also-to paraphrase Bryoni Trezise-reminds us of the potential for falling into a repertoire of behaviours, in order only to produce ourselves-the readers-as ethical subjects. Reading these essays, I found myself constantly having to get up and move around-to walk away-to wrestle with the many ideas, emotions and considerations that these essays evoked, and to consider again, as Helena Grehan points out in her essay, 'the complexities of responsibility, judgment and suffering in situations of extreme conflict' (99).

Keywords

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Book Review

Visions and Revisions: Performance, Memory, Trauma, edited by Bryoni Trezise and Caroline Wake (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013)

SARAH MILLER

Visions and Revisions is a collection of essays edited by Bryoni Trezise and Caroline Wake. Read individually, they are impressive and as a collection, quite compelling, but the subtext of all, and certainly the preoccupation of several, is human beings' ongoing cruelty to others. In seeking to explore the various ways in which we might enact, embody, perform, commemorate, intervene or take responsibility for terrible histories and current cruelties the effects and affects of which extend into our everyday, this collection also—to paraphrase Bryoni Trezise—reminds us of the potential for falling into a repertoire of behaviours, in order only to produce ourselves—the readers—as ethical subjects. Reading these essays, I found myself constantly having to get up and move around—to walk away—to wrestle with the many ideas, emotions and considerations that these essays evoked, and to consider again, as Helena Grehan points out in her essay, 'the complexities of responsibility, judgment and suffering in situations of extreme conflict' (99).

Because much of the public conversation in Australia of late has been about the Federal Government's budget handed down in May, with its savage cuts including \$534 million slashed from Indigenous programs, amplified by the cuts to programs for both the young and the elderly, massive cuts to education, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcast Service (SBS) cut by \$43.5 million, \$87.5 million cut from the arts, the winding back of international aid, cuts to environmental programs—all of which comes on top of inhumane policy such as the Northern Territory intervention¹—invisible to most of the Australian population, and the publicly endorsed treatment of asylum seekers locked away on Manus Island and Nauru, it is hard not to conclude that compassion, ethics, and responsibility for others have little currency in our public life.

Conversely, the performance of Australianness and nationhood to give just a couple of examples, may be understood – as Chris Hudson so brilliantly describes it, discussing trauma tourism on the Thai-Burma Railway – in terms of an archive of public sentiment into which Australian citizens are carefully inducted. We look after our own. Her essay, 'Memory, Self and Landscape: performing Australian national trauma in Thailand', investigates the ways in which nation and self are performatively produced in a geography of emotion through an examination of the mobilisation of affect and the engaging of the emotions of Australian tourists in the Kanchanaburi district and at Hellfire Pass, the location of the Thai-Burma Railway.

This is a collection that brings together the apparently disparate fields of performance studies on the one hand, and trauma studies on the other. Importantly, however, and as Trezise and Wake note in their introduction:

the authors within [this collection] do not seek to 'apply' trauma studies to performance, nor do they seek to 'cure' trauma through performance as some applied theatre models might do. Rather, they ask what performance (as a theoretical 'object') and performance studies (as a theoretical field) might bring to trauma and memory studies. (16)

Questions of spectatorship, site and embodiment are foregrounded within this study, which is also interested in 'the ongoing project of decolonising trauma studies' (26), and consequently the case studies explored in this collection are drawn from Australia, South Africa, the former Soviet Union, Lebanon and Thailand among others.

Performance is understood variously, encompassing not only the practice of theatre and performance, but performance and embodiment as it is explored, uncovered, and experienced in a wide range of cultural texts. Petra Kuppers' beautifully articulated essay 'Identity Politics of Mobility' discusses the work of two contemporary artists of colour—African American artist, Kara Walker and South African artist, Berni Searle—and draws on the work of poet Lucille Clifton in order to ask 'How do we tend the violent past, the past of slavery, of apartheid' in order to create a path on which history might walk into a future? (81). Kuppers argues that the archive of trauma is too easily forgotten or overwhelmed by 'statistics, case numbers, generalisations' (82). She suggests that an emphasis on performance methods rather than postcolonial or slavery representation analysis might be a more productive strategy for remembering, for creating what she describes as a politics of embodiment that goes beyond identification and usurpation.

Christine Stoddard's essay, 'Torture in the Field of Refracted Suffering: Mike Parr and the Pain of Becoming Un-Australian' quotes Judith Butler: 'That we can be injured, that others can be injured, that we are subject to death at the whim of another, are all reasons for both fear and grief' (57). Her discussion of Parr's work examines the idea of pain as both aesthetic encounter and a form of witnessing, through what she describes as Parr's 'carefully crafted enactments of suffering and violence that implicate viewers in the infliction of injury and dramatise the ethical dilemma posed by technologies of terror and the circulation of images of suffering on the global stage' (59). Somewhat ironically I'd suggest that this essay has some interesting resonances with Geraldine Harris's considered response to the political significance of African American performer Whoopi Goldberg's Broadway performances with their very different relationship to identity and sites of performance: white, male, privileged and avant-garde on the one hand; black, female, and ostensibly mainstream on the other. Harris's essay asks why scholarship in the area of ethical witnessing seldom extends to mainstream popular shows such as *Whoopi: Back*.

West Australian academic, Helena Grehan, is one of the key writers on the relationship between performance, ethics and spectatorship. Grehan's nuanced discussion around the online collaboration between playwright Caryl Churchill, performer Jennie Stoller and producer, Elliot Smith, entitled *7 Jewish Children*, is a meditation and a discussion on the difficulties of making 'a work of art that intervenes in a political reality'—in this case—the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. Her discussion of this online production performance, and in particular her ideas around 'Responding to the Other and the Question of Proximity' (109) reminds me of the work of Lebanese actor, writer and director, Rabih Mroué, and particularly his highly confronting lecture/performance, *The Pixelated Revolution*, a searing work which exposes the way in which Syrians capture their own deaths on mobile phones, representing a present trauma, disseminated and recirculated through social media.

Trauma tourism is discussed broadly in the essay of Laurie Beth Clarke as an ‘interdiscipline’ that attends to the practices of constructing and visiting ‘sites of memory’ (135). Her research focuses on concentration camps in Poland and Germany, slave forts in Ghana, apartheid museums in South Africa, genocide memorials throughout Rwanda and Cambodia, peace parks at atomic blast sites in Japan, clandestine torture centres and other purpose built memorials in Argentina and Chile and multiple locations in Vietnam. I have no doubt that Manus Island and Nauru will be on her radar in the not too distant future.

Bryoni Trezise’s excellent ‘Grave Dancing: Divergent Recollection along the Tourist Traumascape’, discusses the work of Melbourne artist Jane Korman, whose video of her father, Holocaust survivor, Adolek Kohn dancing to Gloria Gaynor’s 1978 disco anthem, *I will survive*, with five of his grandchildren across various memorial sites in central and eastern Europe on YouTube is part of Trezise’s exploration of the ‘industry’ of trauma tourism. ‘Architecture of the Aftermath’ by Adrian Lahoud and Sam Spurr examines urbanism in the aftermath of conflict to discuss a speculative form of architecture, seeing cities such as Beirut less in terms of trauma than as sites of resilience.

The collection concludes with Melbourne writer, Maria Tumarkin’s evocative essay titled ‘Listening to the Long Soviet Silence: Trauma, Memory and the Soviet Experience’. This essay connects the historical and psychic legacy of the seven decades of terror in the former soviet union, to what she calls the great Australian silence about the scale and legacy of the colonial violence and dispossession, generated exactly she says, by ‘sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel’s troika of pain-avoidance, fear and shame’ (223).

It is difficult to do justice to any of these essays which are intelligent, subtle, nuanced, and attentive to complexity, but I want to conclude with Caroline Wake’s wonderful framing essay, ‘The Accident and the Account: Towards a Taxonomy of Spectatorial Witness in Theatre and Performance Studies’ which not only provides the reader with a precise vocabulary for the discourse of spectatorial witnessing, but moves the conversation away from ‘notions of activity and ethics towards notions of temporality’ (38). As Wake writes, ‘witnessing is temporally delayed. That is, we are spectators in the moment, but witnesses in and through time.’ (38). She reminds us what is at stake when we call a spectator a witness, and importantly gives back to us the project of art and theatre by reminding us of the ‘impossible paradox of the “rehearsed accident” that makes witnessing in the theatre so impossible and ridiculous, so important and miraculous’ (54).

Visions and Revisions: Performance, Memory, Trauma, is a timely collection for many reasons. Not least because in valuing complexity, nuance, compassion, responsibility, ethics—and yes—not only the making and doing of art and performance—but also the theorising and careful consideration of ideas, it makes an essential contribution to the increasingly urgent need to evoke the possibility of other ways of being in the world.

Notes

1. The ‘Northern Territory (NT) Emergency Response Intervention’ was introduced in 2007 by the Australian Government under Prime Minister John Howard, in order to address allegations of rampant child sexual abuse and neglect. Designed as ‘a set of measures... to protect children, make communities safe, and build a better future for people living in Indigenous communities and town camps in the Northern Territory’, or ‘top end’ of Australia (see <http://www.dss.gov.au/our-responsibilities/indigenous-australians/programs->

[services/closing-the-gap/closing-the-gap-engagement-and-partnership-with-indigenous-people/northern-territory-emergency-response](#)). Critics of the 'Intervention' note its exemption from the Racial Discrimination Act, and the compulsory acquisition of an unspecified number of prescribed communities understood by many as a none too subtle land grab. To date there has not been one prosecution for child abuse, however, the Northern Territory is experiencing escalating rates of suicide and self harm in remote communities, a significant drop in school attendances, and ever increasing rates of domestic violence and Indigenous incarceration, already among the highest in the world. Despite the devastating impact on many communities, this is not an issue that has widespread visibility in non-Aboriginal Australia.

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